

# PARTICIPATING IN EXTRA-CURRICULAR ACTIVITIES AND FOSTERING GREATER LEARNER AUTONOMY AMONG HIGHLY PROFICIENT SECONDARY STUDENTS IN HONG KONG

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## ABSTRACT

*Learner autonomy plays an important role in language learning (Benson, 2011b). To define learner autonomy, Holec (1981) refers it to an individual's ability and responsibility to take charge of his or her own learning. To strengthen learner autonomy, out-of-class learning is essential (Chik, 2015). In Hong Kong, most students learn English as a foreign language. Many local schools, organize different types of extra-curricular activities, e.g. debates, drama, movie club, English ambassador scheme, to create an English-rich environment and encourage students to use the language outside of class (Benson, 2011a; Education Bureau, 2009). However, in Hong Kong, constraints like teacher-centered, examination-oriented teaching (Li, 2011) make developing learner autonomy through out-of-class extra-curricular activities very difficult. In this paper, how and why six Hong Kong students participated in school-initiated extra-curricular activities and its role in developing autonomy will be discussed (Chan, 2012). Based on the results, suggestions on how to help local secondary students benefit more in extra-curricular activities and foster greater learner autonomy will be given.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Learner Autonomy, Self-Directed Learning, Extra-Curricular Activities & Second Language Acquisition*

**Received:** Feb 01, 2018; **Accepted:** Feb 21, 2018; **Published:** Mar 05, 2018; **Paper Id.:** IJESRAPR20186

## INTRODUCTION: LITERATURE REVIEW

### Learner Autonomy and Out-of-Class Learning

Learner autonomy plays an important role in language learning (Benson, 2011b). Holec (1981) defined learner autonomy as learners' ability and responsibility to decide the aims of learning and their content, choose the methods to learn, monitor the learning process, and evaluate their learning outcome. Learners' ability to reflect and act independently is also essential (Little, 1991). Through out-of-class learning, learners can concentrate on personalized practice (Murray & Kojima, 2007), develop autonomy (Benson, 2011b), and improve their language proficiency (Norton & Toohey, 2001). Thus, nowadays, many structured syllabus and schools also incorporate out-of-class learning e.g. extra-curricular activities, as part of the learning requirement (Benson, 2011a).

However, it is demanding for students who are immersed in a teacher-directed learning environment to exercise control of all learning aspects. In view of the current development of out-of-class learning, Benson (2010) then proposed a multi-control model to address the interplay of various parties regarding the nature of control (e.g. attentional process, the degree of participation) from three dimensions, i.e. student control, other control, and no control.

### Learner Autonomy and Extra-Curricular Activities in Hong Kong

In Hong Kong, the government has been promoting autonomous learning and encouraging the use of English

for communicative purpose in the official, structured English language curriculum (Curriculum Development Institute, 2004). However, institutional and cultural constraints, such as examination-oriented, teacher-centered and grammar-focused classroom, student passivity, and strong extrinsic motivational drives, using English being regarded as arrogant, undermined the effectiveness of the policy (Evans, 2008; Hyland, 2004; Urmston & Raquel, 2016) and impeded autonomous learning development (Pierson, 1996; Ruan, 2007). Most local secondary students did not realize their ability and responsibility for carrying out autonomous learning (Miller, 2009).

In Hong Kong, English, in fact, was like a foreign language. To most secondary school students, they rarely communicate with friends and family members in English outside the classroom (Li, 2011). English classroom and English teachers were their main input of English (Berry & McNeill, 2005). To create an English-rich environment, some schools encouraged students to join extra-curricular activities (Benson, 2011a; Education Bureau, 2009). School-based activities like speaking activities (e.g., debates, English Week), leisure activities (e.g., movie appreciation) and English Ambassador Scheme were very common. Students could join these activities out of their own choice. Yet, some activities which required higher English skills were assigned to students with better proficiency. In this study, how and why the six proficient secondary English learners participated in institution-based extra-curricular activities and how they explored ways to develop learner autonomy through other-initiated tasks will be discussed.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

Students who were proficient learners might offer a more comprehensive account of their participation of extra-curricular activities as a good language learners usually engage more in out-of-class learning (Naiman, Fröhlich, Stern, & Todesco, 1996). A qualitative multiple-case design was employed to study how and why six Hong Kong students who were highly proficient at the secondary level participated in extra-curricular activities (Chan, 2012). (This paper focuses on part of the findings; see Chan 2012 for the full report of the author's study). Through a survey and two semi-structured interviews conducted in Cantonese (their first language), the six case participants reflected on their extra-curricular activity experiences and autonomous learning during secondary education. The data in the survey and interview transcripts were coded and analyzed through the thematic approach to study how and why they chose to participate in extra-curricular activities and develop learner autonomy (Hood, 2009; Pavlenko, 2007).

### **Profiles of the Case Participants**

Through purposeful sampling, locally educated, Hong Kong born, native Cantonese-speaking participants who were highly proficient in English were invited. Six participants, Ada, Carl, Elsa, Jo, Mandy, and Terry (pseudonyms), aged 20-21, all scored Grade B (or, Level 5) or above in the English language examination in the Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination (HKCEE) and in the Use of English (UE) examination in Hong Kong Advanced Level Examination (HKALE), which were the university entrance examinations in Hong Kong. During the data collection period, they were studying English or English language education programs. In the following, why the case participants joined the school-based extra-curricular activities and how they developed learner autonomy through the participation of institution-based, authority-directed activities will be discussed. Lastly, suggestion on how students can gain more in extra-curricular activities and develop learner autonomy will be given.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

During secondary education, the case participants joined some other-initiated extra-curricular activities organized by the school. Some were organized on a one-off basis, for example, during some festivals, and welcomed the voluntary participation of all kinds of students. For activities which required a higher level of language skill or specific personalities (e.g. outgoing), students were assigned by the authority (e.g. English teachers) (Chik, 2008). Out of their own interest in specific festive themes and hobbies, Elsa and Jo voluntarily joined other-initiated speaking activities during their senior forms. Terry, Carl, Mandy, and Ada were assigned to take part in teacher-initiated extra-curricular activities.

### Voluntary Participation

Of the six participants, Elsa and Jo were the two who joined after-class English enhancement activities voluntarily, in the absence of the pressure exerted by teachers. Elsa loved the festive activities, e.g. Halloween festival, organized by the student-led English Society. In the Movie Appreciation Club, Jo enjoyed the discussions of favorite movies with her classmates. Their interest made them take an active step to join institution-based other-initiated activities. They also enjoyed the time using English for their interest in an informal setting:

I did find the activities interesting. For example, we played something like ... biting an apple hanging on a tree during Halloween [...] I could play the games and practice English simultaneously. I could speak English. I felt good. (Elsa, interview 1)

Using English with classmates was more casual than communicating with the teacher. It was more comfortable and I didn't have to think too much when I spoke in English. (Jo, interview 1)

The out-of-class setting with minimal teacher supervision, together with the interesting topics encouraged the two girls to take up the other-initiated opportunities to improve the language. Using English between the classmates for social, communicative purposes, and leisure also helped ease the negative connotations of being arrogant and extend the learners of experience of using English beyond instrumental purposes (Hyland, 2004).

Similar to most secondary school learners, Jo and Elsa were not aware of their responsibility to learn and seldom engaged autonomous learning (Miller, 2009). Immersed in teacher-directed, examination orientated learning, they found it very difficult for them to take an active step to join extra-curricular activities which were not required. Thus, Jo and Elsa enlisted help from their friends as learning companions to ease the awkward feeling and struggle (Palfreyman, 2011). With the experience of joining other-initiated activities, they started to find a way to cope with their internal constraints and engage in the learning environment voluntarily, displaying autonomy in terms of choosing appropriate learning activities (for their own interest) and managing their cognitive processes (Benson, 2009; Little, 2008).

However, when asked to review their responsibility to learn, they both admitted that they did not see themselves autonomous. The voluntary participation in other-initiated extra-curricular activities were the only chance that they participated in activities outside formal activities:

Every time, in the beginning, there was someone (teachers or her mother) who forced me to do something in English. Then I kept using and learning English. (Elsa, interview 1)

I just wanted to fulfill my responsibilities when my teachers provided us a method to follow. We just followed. When I grew older, I found that the method I was using might be a method for me to learn actively. (Jo, interview 1)

Jo recognized that the other-initiated activities provided her with out-of-class English learning experiences and a way for her to learn English, which prepared her to engage more in subsequent autonomous practices (e.g. watching movies, English books) in later years. However, they reflected that they did not take up much learning responsibility. The occasional, voluntary use of English did not immediately build up their learner autonomy (Schmenk, 2005). They did not even realize that they had responsibilities to take charge of their learning and they regarded following their teachers' and parents' instructions as an obligation. The low level of learning responsibility and out-of-class experience impeded their autonomous learning development.

### **Teacher-Directed Participation: Leadership**

At local secondary schools, some extra-curricular activities, for example, debate and English Ambassador scheme, were not open to all students, but those who were more advanced and mature learners of English. Terry, Mandy, and Carl were invited to join them.

Terry and Mandy were assigned leadership roles to speak in school-based public functions. Terry delivered the Vote of Thanks on Speech Day while Mandy was an English Ambassador:

The focus (of the Speech Day) was the Vote of Thanks. I was the only one on the stage and the air was silent. All looked at me. If I performed well, it proved my ability to use English well, my English standard [...] A teacher told me that I was one of those who performed very well among the previous head prefects. After delivering the speech, many teachers and principals also encouraged me positively. I felt happy. (Terry, interview 1)

I felt happy as I talked with classmates in English without being monitored. I felt relaxed. The feeling was much different [...] I felt like being a big sister and invited them to speak in English. I did think about how to encourage them to speak more. (Mandy, interview 1)

The assignment of being a head perfect and an English Ambassador encouraged them to engage in the more personalized practice. Terry actively practiced his speech while Mandy initiated more conversations. In these other-initiated, assigned extra-curricular activities, both of them took an active step to monitor and maximize their use of English, demonstrating control in some aspects of the participation (e.g. attentional process, learning methods). To address the intervention of the authorities in school-based learning, Benson (2010) maintained that it is not necessary for learners to meet all aspects of learner autonomy to become autonomous. Thus, Terry and Mandy also engaged in autonomous learning in teacher-directed tasks.

### **Teacher-Directed Participation: Mismatch**

At secondary school, some case participants joined extra-curricular activities "involuntarily," so as to fulfill the instructions given by their teachers. Sometimes, the other-initiated activities created discord with their personalities. Mandy was elected to join the debate team, but she did not enjoy it:

Basically, I didn't like debate because of my personality ... my logic was not good, I believed ... there must be some positive sides of all issues. I didn't like arguing against a point. I just did it out of academic need. (Mandy, interview 1)

Required by the school rule, Carl became a committee member of the English club, and sometimes took up the role of being an emcee in English:

I was not an outgoing person and I loved hiding and focused on thinking on my own. I seldom joined other activities [...] If it was not a requirement, I would not have taken up the English Club duties. It was unlike what I did at home. I learned actively and autonomously at home. (Carl, interview 1)

Carl articulated that the teacher-directed activities were solely an obligation stressed that it was not part of his autonomous learning. Clearly, he was aware of the role of initiation and its relationship with autonomous learning.

However, in the teacher-assigned debate task, Mandy reflected that she benefited from it and regarded it as a chance to learn from other proficient classmates:

Even though my English was good compared with other classmates, my ability could not be proved as good [...] It was just because the level was low in my class. The debate brought me a sense of achievement. It let me know that I was also capable of using English to communicate. (Mandy, interview 1)

To maximize her learning, Mandy developed a personal reason to learn English (to learn from more proficient peers and to evaluate her proficiency).

The case participants joined extra-curricular activities because of interest or obligation. Learner autonomy was developed when they actively controlled how they practiced and used English during the teacher-directed activities and during the voluntary participation in extra-curricular activities (Benson, 2010). However, a mismatch of interest and choices was always found at the school. They struggled to find a personal reason for the participation to internalize and gain more control of the other-initiated activities, which is a process of developing autonomy (Noel, 2009).

## **Discussions and Analysis**

In the secondary school setting, teacher-directed extra-curricular activities were very common, but students were not eager to join them. Yet, the relaxing and interest-based activities (e.g. movie appreciation club, festival games) were well received by the two case participants. The less formal, interesting themes, together with the support of learning peers, encouraged them to take an active step to join the activities and gain skills to cope with their inertia of teacher-centered, examination-oriented and passive, instrumental learning. The extra-curricular activities provided them with self-directed learning skills and experiences of selecting appropriate learning activities (for their own interest) and controlling their cognitive processes (Benson, 2009; Little, 2008), which implies the starting point of developing learner autonomy. Voluntary participation in other-directed out-of-class English activities prepared the case participants for fostering greater learner autonomy. The sense of control formed the basis of autonomy (Benson, 2011b).

In assigned, compulsory, other-initiated extra-curricular activities, developing personal reasons was the way for the case participants to internalize and control the tasks. The assigned responsibilities of leadership roles facilitated the case participants to develop personal involvement and better control the tasks. The internalization of involuntary, compulsory tasks depended on how the case participants actively attached personal goals and developed their own sense of control. Yet, it can be a difficult task for many local learners who are lack of learning responsibility and used to passive, teacher-directed learning.

At secondary school, out-of-class learning activities are usually organized by teachers and schools. With reference to Benson's (2010) multiple-control model, in this paper, the nature of the out-of-class, school-based extra-curricular activities was analyzed with reference to the learners' active choice of participation of activities—(1) compulsory

participation in other-initiated activities and (2) voluntary participation in other-initiated activities. This categorization reflects the interplay of the forces of schools/teachers and learners and addresses the two major aspects of control, i.e. participation and initiation in the local secondary schooling setting.

## IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

In this study, the proficient case participants were not very active in joining a non-required extra-curricular English activities. Taking up learning opportunities was not regarded as part of their learning responsibility. The low exposure of autonomous learning and weak learning responsibility mainly contributed to their low levels of autonomy.

Interestingly, the case participants enjoyed interest-based extra-curricular activities, with minimal intervention. This type of activities can provide learners with self-directed learning experiences and a higher degree of control of their learning materials, and choices, cultivating their sense of autonomy. This also helps them use the language for social purposes and entertainment. To encourage voluntary participation, English teachers should develop more interest-based, leisure-oriented, peer-organized extra-curricular activities. Through activities involving entertainment and social media (e.g. pop culture, comics, online gaming, photo/video-sharing applications), students can easily find a starting point to overcome constraining factors of using English at school and take up out-of-class learning.

In this constraining, teacher-directed learning environment, some case participants developed individual initiatives in other-initiated extra-curricular activities. They then invested more in learning English to satisfy their own needs and internalize the English learning. However, it is very difficult for the majority of local students who are used to passive learning and lack of learning responsibility. Thus, English teachers should help students clarify their roles and responsibilities in English learning. Through extra-curricular activities, English teachers may help them explore their individual goals, understand how to choose learning methods and learning materials, and evaluate language progress for their own needs and goals.

Although the case participants were proficient learners of English, they did not assume a high level of learning responsibility. They were not eager to take up extra-curricular activities; out-of-class activities were regarded as supplementary and optional. Future studies should explore ways to encourage local learners to join extra-curricular activities and develop personal meaning in other-initiated activities.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This paper is based on the author's PhD dissertation and focuses on part of the findings; see Chan (2012) for the author's dissertation.

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